ISLANDS IN THE MIDNIGHT SUN

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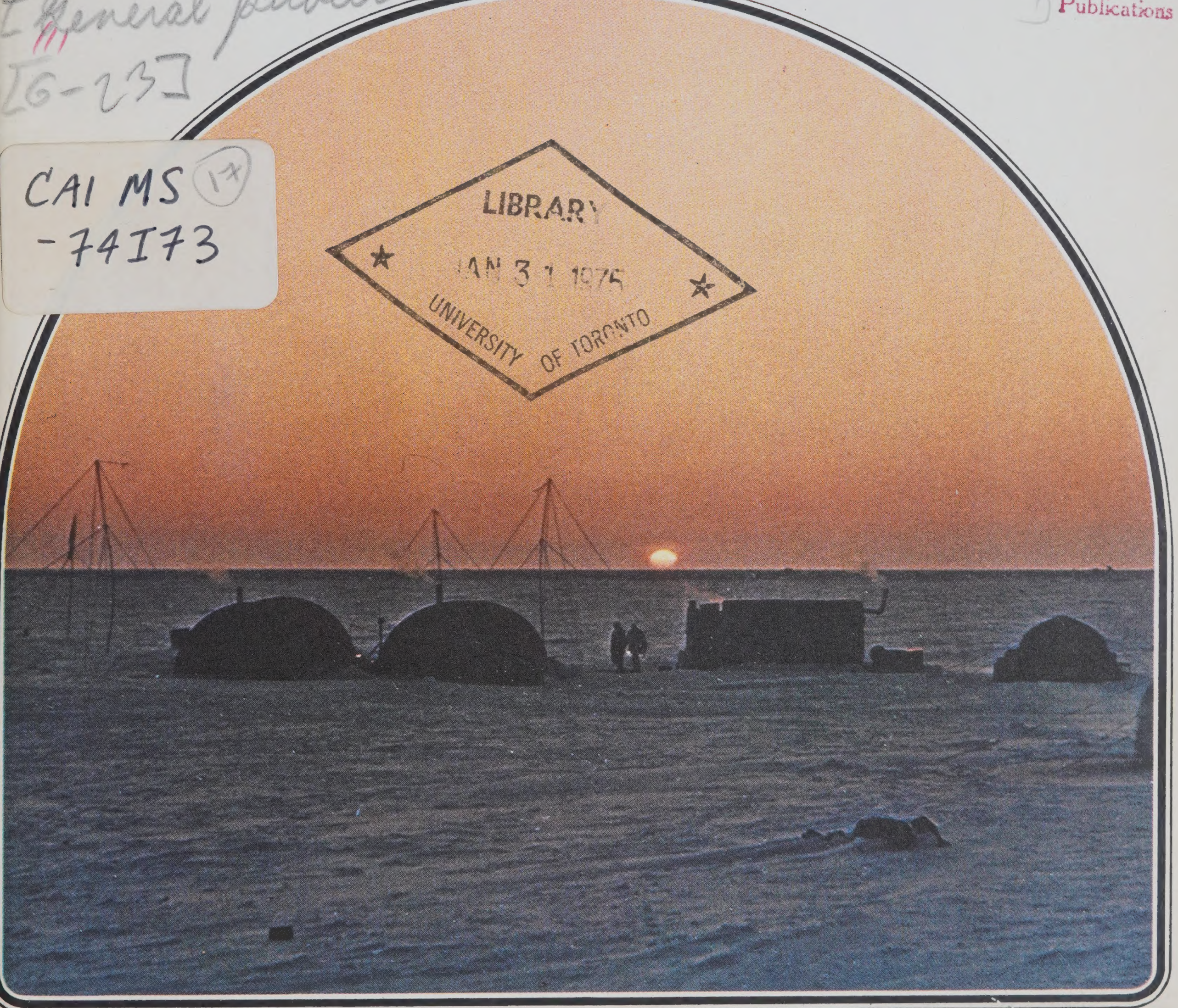


Cover photo

Field camp of the Polar Continental Shelf Project in the midnight sun.

ISLANDS IN THE MIDNIGHT SUN

The story of the
Polar Continental
Shelf Project

"Camp 200 was established in the third week of March, 1967, when the temperature hovered about −50° . . . . The unusually low temperatures encountered during April, coupled with several unfortunate accidents, prevented our placing a recording station any further than 220 km (from the nearest land) . . . . The movement of the ice pack increased considerably during the survey, with the ice camp moving a total of 25 km to the NE along a 'random-walk' path during the 26-day period."

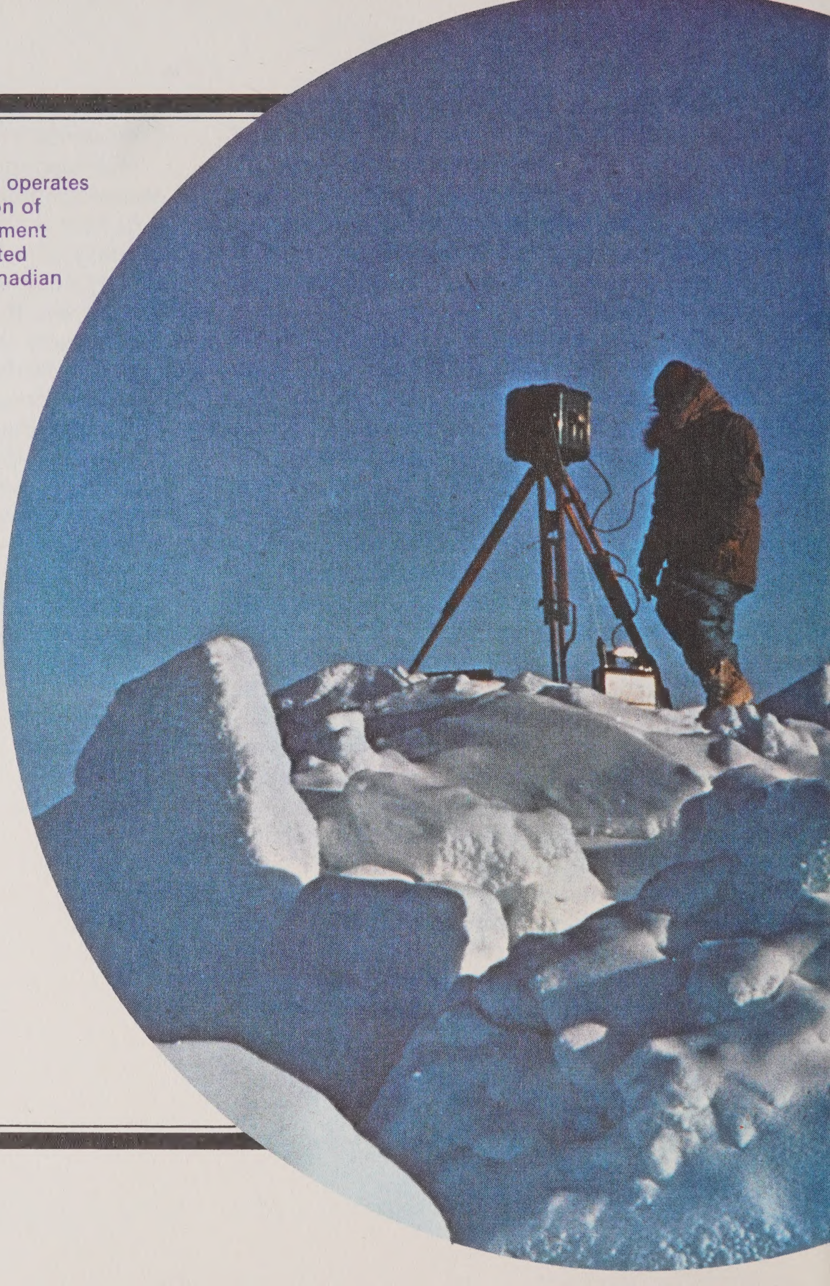
The above is a series of excerpts from a scientific paper published by two seismologists in the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources. What makes it noteworthy is that such type of small talk is not a standard feature of modern scientific reports, whose authors rigorously eschew anything but the matter at hand. And the authors of the paper just quoted felt moved to explain: "The authors appreciate that it is not normal practice to burden the reader with the difficulties of field practice but rather to concentrate exclusively on the results. However, the rigors of an arctic experiment and the uncommon problems encountered may be of interest to any other scientists contemplating a similar endeavor."

Such explanations may well be necessary for the ordinary "other scientists," but there is one scientific fraternity for whom the rigors of the high Arctic are an obvious and readily appreciated fact of life—the men and women who have shared in the field work of Canada's Polar Continental Shelf Project.

(For readers whose curiosity may have been aroused by that cryptic reference to "several unfortunate accidents:" One accident was the burning of a shed at the main camp holding aircraft supplies; another, consequent on the former, was the marooning of a four-man helicopter party on the ice pack for four very uncomfortable days.)

It must be said at the start that this name — Polar Continental Shelf Project or PCSP for short—is a misnomer. It errs on the side of modesty, a peculiarity it has in common with many of its protagonists. The continental shelf in the Arctic—i.e., the submerged portion of the continental landmass that extends under the relatively shallow water tens or hundreds of kilometres into the ocean—is no longer the

Surveyor on top of ice ridge operates tellurometer. The introduction of electronic distance-measurement devices has greatly accelerated accurate mapping of the Canadian Arctic.



sole object of interest. Research and surveys under the auspices of the PCSP now cover all of the Arctic Islands, and sometimes parts of the mainland as well.

The inception of the PCSP dates from 1958, when a government committee, responding to the urgings of a number of concerned scientists and politicians, rang down the curtain on the expeditionary "hit-and-run" approach to arctic research and recommended a sustained, long-term, integrated effort.

It was in the 1950's that the vast resource potential of the world's continental shelves came into the official limelight. Not only were the shallow waters above the shelves rich in fish, the sea bottom itself was a promising hunting ground for oil and gas and possibly other minerals. Also, the shallowness of the ocean over the shelf—generally defined as a depth not exceeding 200 metres—has certain obvious military implications, as for submarine warfare.

It was therefore not surprising that governments of coastal nations all over the world began laying claim to "their" continental shelves. Canada followed suit. And it was with some considerable embarrassment that Canadian geopoliticians, when they turned their attention to the Arctic, found that the only maps outlining the shelf in that area had been produced in the United States and the Soviet Union. Here was a genuine case where Canada's sovereignty had to be asserted. The scientists and technicians who flocked north in the first field season of 1959 packed not only seismographs, tellurometers, echo sounders, and core drills, but Canadian Red Ensigns as well.

The Red Ensign has since been replaced by the Maple Leaf, and it flies securely over the islands and the seas of the high Arctic.

A listing of the scientists and types of surveys supported by the PCSP would take up pages. Even a listing by general fields looks impressive: surveying, mapping and charting of many kinds; geophysical and geological surveys probing deep into the crust of the earth; ice studies on land and on the ocean; terrain studies; studies of arctic fauna and flora; oceanography; anthropology and archeology; historical research.

The names of two men, above all others, have become identified with Canada's research efforts in the high Arctic. W. E. ("Van") van Steenburgh, who then held the post of Director General of Scientific Services in the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys (now EMR), was instrumental in proposing and pushing through the PCSP, and planning its early strategy. E. F. ("Fred") Roots was the Co-ordinator of the PCSP until very recently, when his place was taken by George Hobson.

Both van Steenburgh and Roots were aware that successful and efficient arctic exploration, on a continuous scale, depended on two technological factors: safe, reliable air transport, and a reliable position-finding system. Piloting small planes in the rugged north had long been a Canadian specialty, but planes alone would not do over the Polar Shelf, where landings could not be confined to unobstructed patches of land, ice, or water. In 1955, the Geological Survey of Canada had carried out a far-flung reconnaissance survey of the Arctic with

Members of oceanographic field party lower diver through hole in ice.

A moment of relaxation in the Arctic sun.

the extensive use of helicopters, the so-called Operation Franklin. And it was this experience that contributed largely to the use of the chopper as one of the workhorses of the PCSP. The other requirement, that of accurate, reliable position-finding on the monotonous pack-ice and the then still poorly mapped islands was taken care of with the installation of a Decca chain—an electronic system that covers a given area with an invisible grid of signals and enables survey teams to read off their position from a figure on a "black box."

Thus equipped, the sustained exploration of the Canadian high Arctic began. The first summer—the field work takes place mainly in the 24-hour daylight of the arctic summer—PCSP teams were guests of Canada–U.S. weather stations, but later they set up their own base camp or camps. There are now two of these, one serving the eastern Arctic from Resolute on Cornwallis Island, and the other serving the western Arctic from Tuktoyaktuk ("Tuk") on the mainland coast, just east of the Mackenzie River delta.

The men involved in arctic research are conscious of making history. Men are still active in field work who were the first human beings to set foot on some of the Arctic Islands, hitherto known to geographers only from air photographs. The first landing of a Canadian plane on or near the North Pole took place in June 1967. It was a twin-engine Bristol, and it carried a small team of gravity experts—men who take precise measurements of variations in gravity with a view to determining the composition of the earth's crust. The plane was a larger aircraft than had been planned, which meant that it would need a fairly long, solid, flat ice surface to set down on—a minimum of 900 metres, to be exact. The pilot found a promising ice pan a few kilometres from the Pole, and after some close passes he ever so cautiously eased the plane onto it, touching the pan at the very edge.

Afraid to come to a complete rest, the pilot kept taxiing, while a couple of men jumped out and frantically began to drill the ice, to determine if it was thick enough. It was; and all went well from then on. (When they measured the length of the "runway" they found it was only slightly over 700 metres.)

That plane is now on display at the edge of the Yellowknife airport, resting on a tall concrete base, a ghostly silhouette looming above the ragged black spruce.

Air transport is needed to and in the Arctic not only because of the roadless terrain but also because of the vast distances that have to be covered rapidly. The distance from Ottawa to Alert, at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, is greater than the distance from Ottawa to the Panama Canal.

Seismic explosion.

Arctic terrain near Tuktoyaktuk, on the shore of the Beaufort Sea.

The tremendous expense involved in living, working and travelling in the Arctic, the uncertainty of all plans because of changes in weather and equipment breakdown, the physical difficulties in making measurements and taking samples in the severe northern environment, even in summer, all have a deleterious effect on research. Roots has developed an entire psychological theory of arctic research. The line between research and the method whereby it is carried out often becomes blurred, he says. "The inflexibility of schedule often forces hasty work, with no chance for consultation or repeated observation; it leads to a habit of rushed, uncritical observation and description." Researchers suffer psychologically from their total dependence on the decisions and services of those who manipulate their lifelines.

Only the largest and most affluent organizations can afford to by-pass the PCSP network. Most others, along with scientists working on their own, work out their schedules with the Coordinator and are assigned aircraft or helicopter time, along with other aids, a system that costs $3 million a year.

To quote Roots again: "The researcher cannot hire half a helicopter and so must charter a whole one. But in an isolated area it is not safe to operate one machine by itself, so he must hire two. Two helicopters cannot keep themselves supplied with fuel except at unreasonable cost and delay, so it is necessary to hire a fixed-wing aircraft to lay fuel caches. But one cannot have three aircraft operating in isolation without adequate communications, so a radio network is necessary. The net result is that in order to get a helicopter ride the research party finds itself running an airline."

Most scientists and surveyors are from the departments of Energy, Mines and Resources and Environment, but there have been others from many Canadian and also foreign research institutions. They are supported by the PCSP if their research promises to contribute to Canadian scientific objectives.

The first need of the PCSP in the field of surveys was accurate control of the Decca chain along the northwest front of the Arctic Archipelago, and a link-up between that chain and the geodetic control network across Canada. This was accomplished through tellurometer and theodolite traverses from island to island, all the way from the Mackenzie delta to the northern tip of Ellesmere Island. Surveying on the ice pack called not only for some fancy footwork but also for intricate calculations accounting for ice drift. The work produced a few surprises: Meighen Island, for example, turned out to be a whole degree longitude from where existing maps had it.

Tuktoyaktuk base of the Polar Continental Shelf Project at Tuktoyaktuk.

Special topographic surveys were made of icecaps on some islands and in support of geomorphological, geophysical and hydrographic surveys. One interesting geodetic survey aims at determining whether there is any slow, long-term change in position between Canada and Greenland—a test of the theory of continental drift.

The most recent geodetic survey consists of a five-year program of establishing exact, primary control throughout the Arctic by means of electronic signals from orbiting satellites, an application of the so-called Doppler effect, the change in wavelength produced by a moving source.

Hydrographic charting, which traditionally has served the purposes of marine navigation, took on new roles in the Arctic: delineating the continental shelf, assisting marine geology in the study of sea-bottom morphology. Hydrographic charting has been carried out from a variety of vehicles: ships of the Canadian Hydrographic Service based at Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, and at Victoria, B.C., helicopters, and even Hovercraft, equipped with an echo-sounding attachment thought up by PCSP's own hydrographer, Hans Pulkkinen.

The Canadian Geological Survey's reconnaissance mapping of the Arctic Islands antedates the PCSP, and the Survey, from its Institute of Sedimentary and Petroleum Geology at Calgary, continues to carry out bedrock mapping in the Arctic independent of the PCSP. Geological mapping and investigation of arctic terrain, however, is generally carried out under the logistics umbrella of the Project.

Members of a Polar Continental Shelf Project field party inspect huts of "Fort Conger" near the northern end of Ellesmere Island, built by R. E. Peary during his attempts to reach the North Pole at the turn of the century.

Terrain study has gained paramount importance in the Arctic. Oil exploration and associated mechanized activities have placed a sudden burden on the arctic terrain, which, because of the severe climate, reacts quite differently from the same soil types in the prairies or northern Ontario. John Fyles, a geologist who spent considerable time in the Arctic, points out that many persons concerned about the damage that might be done to the Arctic by exploration have a mistaken conception about the surface. "We are dealing with entirely different types of terrain," he says. "In the Mackenzie River delta, for example, there is spongy muskeg, covering the ground with an insulating blanket. If you remove the blanket, the soil breaks up and erodes quickly. In the Arctic Islands there is very little vegetation, the ground is essentially a desert, and is less susceptible to damage." Terrain geologists have moved from a mapping of landforms to a study of the surficial strata themselves, not only on land but also on the bottom of the straits between the islands. If pipelines are to be laid across these frigid wastes, such knowledge will be invaluable.

Members of a seismic team are stringing together explosives for test.

Geophysicists from EMR's Earth Physics Branch have probed deep into the earth's crust with geomagnetic, seismic and gravity measurements. All of these will ultimately aid in the search for oil or ores, but the information is also useful for marine and air navigation, communications, earthquake prediction, monitoring of nuclear tests, geodetic surveys, and other disciplines.

One of the most important fields of research under the auspices of the PCSP is ice studies, on land and sea. By probing the heavy icecaps that sit on some of the arctic islands—stragglers from the icesheet that once covered all of Canada during the Ice Ages—glaciologists learn much about the climatic history of the earth. The bottom layer of the icecap on Devon Island, for example, is about 100,000 years old, and locked in its frigid depth are telltale chemical and other clues to what was going on in the atmosphere and on the ground long before the dawn of human history.

Oil-drilling rig sits in the midst of frozen wilderness of Mackenzie River delta.

Most of the ice that floats down the straits between Baffin Island and Greenland originates in the waters off the western Queen Elizabeth Islands, and it may take more than a year to complete its journey. Monitoring the formation, composition, behavior and movement of sea ice is one of the important tasks of PCSP researchers.

The interaction between atmosphere, ice, and water in the Arctic produces far-reaching effects on our environment much farther south, effects that are still poorly understood. An ambitious effort has therefore been launched in co-operation between Canadian and American scientists to study these relationships. Like many terms thought up by people wrapped up in the jargon of technical gadgetry, its name is not particularly esthetic: AIDJEX—Arctic Ice Dynamics Joint Experiment. Preliminary studies have been carried out over several years, with the major effort planned for 1975. It will involve the placing of fairly large field camps on floating ice islands, and an extensive program of oceanographic, atmospheric, glaciological and geophysical studies.

Slowly, painstakingly, the Arctic is being compelled to yield its secrets.

Prepared for Polar Continental Shelf Project
by Public Relations and Information Services Branch

Cat. No.: M78-2/1974

INFO. SER. 118

RBW Owen Sound 07KX - 23239 - 6484